

# Handout 7: The Descartes-Elisabeth Correspondence

Philosophy 322: Modern Philosophy  
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Spring 2016

## DESCARTES'S INTERACTIONISM

In the Sixth *Meditation*, Descartes argued that his mind and body are distinct kinds of things; i.e., they have different 'primary attributes'. His mind is a thinking substance, and his body is extended. The claim that mind and body are distinct kinds of things is known as *dualism*. But despite his dualism, Descartes acknowledges that his mind and body are so tightly connected that they are, in a sense, one thing:

Nature also teaches that I am present to my body not merely in the way a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am most tightly joined and, so to speak, commingled with it, so much so that I and the body constitute one single thing (53).

Descartes says that he (i.e., his mind) is closely aware of his body. For example, pain, hunger, and thirst are "confused sensations" which enable his mind to detect the needs of his body. His experiences of colors, sounds, and odors lead his mind to judge that "various other bodies exist around my body, some of which are to be pursued, while others are to be avoided" (AW 65a). The purpose of these sensations, Descartes appears to believe, is to enable him to take care of his body:

I can think of no better arrangement than that [the brain] produces the one sensation that, of all the ones it is 57).

The brain is part of the body. So Descartes thinks that his body – in particular, his brain – is *causally connected* to his mind ("my mind is not immediately affected by all the parts of the body, but only by the brain, or perhaps even by just one small part of the brain" 56). He also thinks that his mind is causally connected to his body (experiencing pain "as if it is occurring in the foot ... provokes the mind to do its utmost to move away from the cause of the pain" 57). Thus Descartes appears to endorse not just *dualism*, but *interactionism*:

*Interactionism*. Mind and body directly causally interact with each other.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Though most interpreters regard Descartes as an interactionist, this is not a consensus view. Many of Descartes's

In a later book entitled *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes develops a theory that describes mind-body interaction. He held that mind and body causally interact at the pineal gland, a small point in the center of the brain. He had a rather elaborate account of what went on in this interaction, but the important thing for our purposes is that Descartes holds that somehow, what goes on at the pineal gland enables the mind and body to causally interact.

#### ELISABETH'S CHALLENGE TO DESCARTES'S INTERACTIONISM

In a letter written in May of 1643, Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia posed the following challenge to his interactionism:

I beseech you tell me how the soul of man (since it is but a thinking substance) can determine the spirits of the body to produce voluntary actions. For it seems every determination of movement happens from an impulsion of the thing moved, according to the manner in which it is pushed by that which moves it, or else, depends on the qualification and figure of the superficies of this latter. Contact is required for the first two conditions, and extension for the third. You entirely exclude extension from your notion of the soul, and contact seems to me incompatible with an immaterial thing.<sup>2</sup>

We can think of Elisabeth's challenge as an objection:

- (1) If X directly causes a body to move, then X is extended.
- (2) If X is a thinking substance, it is not extended.
- ∴(3) So, if X is a thinking substance, X cannot directly cause a body to move.

Clearly, Descartes endorses premise (2). In the paragraph above, Elisabeth offers considerations in favor of (1). Her idea is that a body can only be directly caused to move by physical contact with another body. But a non-extended thing can't make physical contact with anything. So unless X is extended, it can't directly cause a body to move. Not only does this line of thinking have a lot of intuitive pull, it's also right in line with the spirit of Descartes's mechanistic physics. To resist Elisabeth's objection, Descartes has to deny this appealing claim.

Descartes first responds by saying that we have a "primitive notion" of the union of mind and body (Atherton, 13). He appears to be suggesting that in addition to our conception of body-body causation, we also have a conception of mind-body causation. This kind of causation "cannot be understood except through itself" (Atherton, 13); i.e., one cannot understand or explain mind-body causation in terms of body-body causation. The two kinds of causation are fundamentally distinct, and confusion results from the failure to distinguish them.

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immediate followers endorsed *occasionalism*, the view that bodily events only *indirectly* cause mental events (and vice versa). For the occasionalist, certain bodily events (e.g., the stubbing of your toe) serves as an "occasion" for God to directly cause you to have a certain mental event (in this case, the sensation of pain in your toe). Some interpreters regard Descartes as an occasionalist.

<sup>2</sup>From Margaret Atherton, ed., "Selections of the Descartes-Elisabeth Correspondence," in *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period* (Hackett 1994), p. 11-12.

Descartes cites our idea of weight as an example of this confusion. Scholastic physics regarded weight as an intrinsic property of a body that impelled it to move towards the center of the earth. If bodies have weight in this sense, then they can move without physical contact with another body. According to Descartes's physics, bodies do *not* have this property (elsewhere, Descartes explains the movements we attribute to weight — i.e., falling — in terms of the movements of minute, invisible particles surrounding the earth that push objects toward its surface). When we attribute weight to bodies, we are incorrectly attributing to them a kind of causal power that minds have over bodies (“we are abusing what has been given us for conceiving the manner in which the soul moves the body” (Atherton, 15)).

But Elisabeth is unmoved by Descartes's appeal to the idea of a “primitive notion” of mind-body causation:

I admit it would be easier for me to concede matter and extension to the soul, than the capacity of moving a body and of being moved, to an immaterial being (Atherton, 16).

Descartes then makes the following suggestion:

But, since Your Highness notes it is easier to attribute matter and extension to the soul than to attribute to it, when it has no matter, a capacity to move a body and be moved by one, I ask her to please freely attribute this matter and this extension to the soul; for that is nothing but to conceive it united to the body (Atherton, 19).

It is hard to know what to make of this admonition. If the soul is *not* extended, how can *conceiving of it as* extended help us to answer Elisabeth's question? Moreover, since the soul's being “united with the body” consists at least in part of the soul's being causally connected with the body, it is hard to understand how one can conceive of the soul as being united with the body without already being able to conceive of the soul's being causally connected with the body. And it's this connection which Elisabeth claims to be incapable of conceiving.

Descartes concludes his letter by advising Elisabeth that while “it is very necessary, once in one's life, to have well understood the principles of metaphysics [...] I also believe it would be very harmful to occupy one's understanding in frequently meditating upon them” (Atherton, 20). But she is not dissuaded by this rather condescending advice, and replies:

I think there are unknown properties in the soul that might suffice to reverse what your metaphysical meditations, with such good reasons, persuaded me concerning her inextension. And this doubt seems founded upon the rule you lay down there in speaking of the true and the false—namely, that all our errors occur from forming judgments about what we do not sufficiently perceive (Atherton, 21)

Descartes did not reply further to this line of questioning. But many subsequent readers have thought that Elisabeth comes out of the debate with the upper hand. If the mind exerts causal power over the body, it is very hard to see how the mind could be a fundamentally different kind of thing than the body.